



Fighting Child Soldiers

P.W. Singer, Ph.D.

On today's battlefield, U.S. soldiers often encounter civilians of ambiguous status—refugees, members of relief organizations, soldiers masquerading as noncombatants, and children. Increasingly, however, these children are combatants, and U.S. troops must face the psychological effects that come with having to fight them.

It is immoral that adults should want children to fight their wars for them. . . . There is simply no excuse, no acceptable argument for arming children.

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu¹

THERE IS NO moral excuse for sending children into battle, but the dark reality is that this terrible practice is a regular feature of modern warfare. Some 300,000 children under the age of 18 (both boys and girls) are now combatants, fighting in approximately 75 percent of the world's conflicts.²

Among Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's human-rights violations was his policy of recruiting children into Iraq's armed forces, in clear violation of international law and moral norms.³ Already, U.S. and allied forces have faced child soldiers in the fighting around Karbala and Nasariyah.⁴

Since the mid-1990s, thousands of Iraqi boys have attended military-style summer boot camps. During the 3-week-long sessions, boys as young as 10 years old went through drills, learned the use of small arms,

and received heavy doses of Ba'ath political indoctrination. The camps were named after resonating current events to help galvanize recruitment and add to the political effect. For example, the 2001 summer camp series was titled the *Al Aqsa Intifada*, to link it with the symbology of the Palestinian uprising that started earlier that year.⁵ Beginning in 1998, the military directed a series of training and military preparedness programs toward the entire Iraqi population, including boys as young as 15. The preparedness sessions, which generally ran for 2 hours a day over 40 days, mandated drilling and training on small arms.

The Ba'athist regime's reasons for training and recruiting children were manifold. A common method for totalitarian regimes to maintain control is to militarize society and set it on a constant war footing. Such actions allow for a controlling hierarchy and help divert internal tensions toward external foes. Hussein's regime was no exception. Approximately half of the Iraqi population is under the age of 18, roughly 11 million out of 22 million citizens. This sig-

nificant youth cohort represented a deep pool of potential forces, as well as a potential threat, if not organized toward the regime's goals. Most important, recruiting, training, and indoctrinating children offered the opportunity to deepen the regime's reach into its society.

In Iraq, in addition to broad training programs, the regime organized several child-soldier units. The first appeared to fall under the *Futuwah* (Youth Vanguard) movement, a Ba'ath party initiative formed in the late 1970s aimed at creating a paramilitary organization among children at the secondary school level. In this regime-run program, children as young as 12 were organized into units and received military training and political indoctrination. Units of this force were deployed in the losing stages of Iraq's war with Iran between 1983 and 1985.⁶

The *Ashbal Saddam* (Saddam Lion Cubs), a more recent organization, was formed after Iraq's defeat during the 1991 Persian Gulf war, when the regime's hold on power became shakier.⁷ The *Ashbal Saddam* involved boys between the ages of 10 and 15, who attended military training camps and learned the use of small arms and infantry tactics. The camps were reputedly quite intensive, involving as much as 14 hours a day of military training and political indoctrination. The camps also used severe training techniques such as frequent beatings and acts of cruelty to animals to desensitize the youth to violence. The exact numbers of the *Ashbal Saddam* are not known, but there were an estimated 8,000 members in Baghdad alone.

The *Ashbal Saddam* was a feeder program to the paramilitary group *Fedayeen Saddam* (Saddam's Men of Sacrifice).⁸ The *Fedayeen* recently came to the fore in the fighting in Southern Iraq where their unexpected levels of resistance and willingness to violate codes of war (such as through false surrenders and use of civilian shields, complicated U.S. forces' early progress and ability to secure supply lines. The *Fedayeen Saddam* was originally formed as a competitive layer of security to the regime and as an organ for intimidating the populace. The *Fedayeen* reported directly to the presidential palace instead of to the army or to the Republican

Guard. The *Fedayeen's* members were specifically recruited from regions and tribes considered most loyal to the Hussein family. Reportedly, the *Fedayeen* included a special unit known as the Death Squadron, which executed suspected regime opponents, often inside the victims' homes.⁹

Hussein's regime was not the only actor within Iraq to use child soldiers. Child soldiers are also



"Saddam Lion Cubs" undergoing weapons training in Iraq.

Thousands of Iraqi boys have attended military-style summer boot camps. During the 3-week-long sessions, boys as young as 10 years old went through drills, learned the use of small arms, and received heavy doses of Ba'ath political indoctrination.... The 2001 summer camp series was titled the Al Aqsa Intifada, to link it with the symbology of the Palestinian uprising that started earlier that year.

present in the various Iraqi opposition forces. For instance, there are roughly 3,000 children serving in the Kurdish PKK.¹⁰ The group even organized a children's battalion called the *Tabura Zaroken Sehit Agit*.



US Army

Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, Inspector General of the Panzer Arm, with Hitler Youth members. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Hitler Youth served as a feeder program for the German military.

The Ashbal Saddam was a feeder program to the paramilitary group Fedayeen Saddam. . . . A common method for totalitarian regimes to maintain control is to militarize society and set it on a constant war footing. Such actions allow for a controlling hierarchy and help divert internal tensions toward external foes. Hussein's regime was no exception. Approximately half of the Iraqi population is under the age of 18, roughly 11 million out of 22 million citizens.

Hitler Youth/Saddam Lion Cubs

The best historic parallel to the use of child soldiers is the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) during World War II. Much as in the relationship between the *Ashbal Saddam* and the *Fedayeen*, the *Jugend* was designed to inculcate political loyalty and to act as a feeder to regime security forces for such units as the SS. In 1945, as Allied forces entered Germany and as the regime became desperate, the group moved into a combat role. The *Jugend* were organized into small units and deployed to disrupt and delay Allied advances and to serve as the core of a longer term guerrilla campaign.¹¹

Similarly, the worry with the *Ashbal Saddam* and other armed Iraqi youths is when they move from the recruiting ground to deployment. The most likely situations in which they might be encountered are when U.S. forces enter Iraqi cities. Early indications of this strategy did occur in the first weeks of fighting in the South. But, U.S. and allied forces must remain alert to the potential of children carrying out terrorist-type targeting of U.S. forces and installations behind battle lines, especially in recently occupied territory.

Given the high levels of political indoctrination child soldiers receive, the flow of the war and the dissolution of resistance from the regular Iraqi Army might be disconnected from the actions of child-soldier units or individuals. If history holds true, the most probable incidents will occur in the closing stages of

the war, perhaps even when war is seemingly over. Incidents might extend into the occupation period, which makes accounting for *Ashbal Saddam* members a necessary part of any program of de-Ba'athification.

Because of the overwhelming advantage U.S. forces have, Iraq's child soldiers will not change the final strategic outcome. However, experiences from around the globe demonstrate that children make effective combatants and often operate with terrifying audacity, particularly when infused with religious or political fervor or when under the influence of narcotics. In general, children on the battlefield add to the overall confusion of battle. Such units can slow down the progress of U.S. forces, particularly in urban areas, and needlessly add to casualty totals on both sides.

For professional forces, child soldiers present the essential quandary, perhaps even more difficult than the issue of civilian casualties. Children are traditionally considered outside the scope of war. Yet, now they are potential threats to soldiers' lives and missions. Using children as soldiers presents two added concerns. First, children are not seen as hated enemies. U.S. soldiers usually exhibit a great amount of empathy toward children in war-torn counties. Consequently, engagements with child soldiers can be incredibly demoralizing for professional troops and can also affect unit cohesion. For example, there was little official dilemma or controversy over Allied ac-

tions against the *Hitler Jugend* in 1945. The youths were fighting to defend an absolutely evil regime, and the general agreement among the Allies was that Hitler's regime had to be completely defeated. Yet, the experience of fighting against the *Jugend* was so unsettling to U.S. Armed Forces that troop morale fell to some of the lowest points of the entire war.¹² Likewise, British forces operating in West Africa in 2001 faced deep problems of clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among individual soldiers who had faced child soldiers.¹³

A second consideration is the public-affairs nightmare that surrounds the use of child soldiers. In the reports on the initial engagements with child soldiers,

both the Arab and international press focused on the immediate act of U.S. soldiers shooting Iraqi children, rather than on the context that led them to be forced into such a terrible dilemma. The children were portrayed as heroic martyrs defending their homes, facing the American Goliath. This image obviously damages U.S. public information efforts to demonstrate the rightness of a cause or the special care U.S. and allied forces take to protect innocents. The potential backlash could imperil already tenuous support from regional allies and harden attitudes elsewhere against giving aid to the United States in the broader war on terrorism. The backlash could increase popular support and recruiting for terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, who could claim to be avenging the youth. Finally, the effect caused by seeing photographs of tiny bodies could become potent fodder for congressional criticism and antiwar protestors.¹⁴ These points underscore the general proviso that military force should only be used when and where objectives warrant.

Policy Suggestions

In Iraq and elsewhere in deployments in the war on terrorism, U.S. troops face real and serious threats from opponents to whom they generally would prefer not to do harm. Child soldiers, combined with the increasing simplicity and lethality of modern small arms, can bring to bear a great deal of military threat. To avoid any confusion, rules of engagement (ROE) must be clarified to deal with child soldiers. To overcome the shock at the nature or tactics of their adversary (as reportedly happened with the *Fadayeen*) and to maintain the ability to react quickly, U.S. forces' intelligence briefs must prepare soldiers for the possibility of fighting against child soldiers. A microsecond's hesitation could cost U.S. soldiers their lives.

As an illustration of the potential harm possible, in 2000, British army forces operating in West Africa were unprepared for such instances. In one case, an entire patrol was captured because of

A 16- or 17-year-old member of the 12th SS Panzer *Hitler Jugend* Division in Normandy, France, June 1944. The Hitler Youth Division's training cadres were supplied by the 1st SS Panzer Division.



Bundesarchiv

The best historic parallel to the use of child soldiers is the Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth) during World War II. . . . The Jugend was designed to inculcate political loyalty and to act as a feeder to regime security forces for such units as the SS. In 1945 . . . the Jugend were organized into small units and deployed to disrupt and delay Allied advances and to serve as the core of a longer term guerrilla campaign.



International Defense Review

The relatively effective use of young Iranian "martyrs" in the Iran-Iraq War prompted Saddam to deploy children as young as 12 during the losing stages of Iraq's war with Iran between 1983 and 1985.

Child soldiers present the essential quandary, perhaps even more difficult than the issue of civilian casualties. Children are traditionally considered outside the scope of war. Yet, now they are potential threats to soldiers' lives and missions. . . . Another consideration is the public-affairs nightmare that surrounds the use of child soldiers.

the commanding officer's lack of ROE guidance and unwillingness to fire on "children armed with AKs."¹⁵ Despite the officer's well-founded moral objection, his tactical choices in a situation where he had to ad-lib a tactical response threatened his overall mission and might in the long run have caused more deaths. (His patrol was later rescued by an SAS operation that left more than 100 child soldiers and one British soldier dead.)

The underlying point is that a bullet from a 14-year-old's gun can kill just as effectively as can one from a 40-year old's. Likewise, a bomb makes no discrimination to its bearer's age. The youngest

reported terrorist is 9-year-old boy who carried a bomb into a polling station in Colombia in 1997. When U.S. forces deploy into an area where child soldiers are reportedly present, they must take added precautions to counter and keep the threat at a distance.

All children are not threats and certainly should not be targeted as such, but force-protection measures must include the possibility or the likelihood of child soldiers and child terrorists. U.S. forces must change the practice of allowing children to mingle freely with soldiers at checkpoints. They must subject children to the same inspection and scrutiny as adults.

When U.S. forces face child soldiers, the best practice appears to be to hold the threat at a distance and initially fire for shock to attempt to break up the child units, which often are not cohesive fighting forces. In a sense, this is the micro-level application of effects-based warfare, but without the overwhelming dependence on high technology. Demonstrative artillery fires (including smoke) and helicopter gunship passes and fires have proven especially effective in shocking and breaking up child-soldier forces.¹⁶ When forced into close engagement, forces should first seek to target then eliminate any adult leaders, as their hold over the unit is often the center of gravity.

An important realization is that total annihilation of the enemy in these instances might actually backfire. That is, confrontations against child soldiers are ones in which the U.S. benefits more by not causing lethal harm. Thus, where possible, U.S. forces should explore options for using non-lethal weapons, which might be more effective and humane for dealing with child soldiers than more traditional means. Doing so would certainly avoid the terrible public

affairs cost and also help solidify political and public support for ongoing operations and long-term efforts.

Psychological operations (PSYOPs) should continue to be integrated into overall efforts against Iraqi resistance, including being specially designed for child-soldier units. Their aim should be to convince child soldiers to stop fighting, leave their units, and begin the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Efforts should also be made to deter adult leaders from employing child soldiers by reminding them that, just as with using weapons of mass destruction, using children to fight is a war crime that will bring about their prosecution.

PSYOPs should also seek to undercut any support for the doctrine within Iraqi society by citing the great harm the practice inflicts on the next generation on behalf of a fruitless cause.

Defeating a child-soldier-based opposition does not just occur on the battlefield. Forces must also take measures to quickly welcome child-soldier escapees and enemy prisoners of war. Doing so helps dispel any myths concerning U.S. retribution and induces others to leave the opposition as well. Once soldiers ensure the child does not present a threat, they should provide any immediate needs of food, clothing, or shelter. The child will have depended on his armed group for these things, so U.S. forces must fill the void. To help break the system of control that brought them into warfare, children should be kept separate from adult enemy prisoners of war. Then, as soon as possible, soldiers should turn the child over to health-care or nongovernmental organizations professionals.

American forces must also look to the health of their own personnel, dealing with the repercussions of engagements with child-soldier forces. Units or individuals might require special postconflict treatment, akin to what many police organizations offer after shooting incidents. Otherwise, the consequence of being forced to kill children might ultimately undermine unit cohesion and combat effectiveness.

Media images can undermine domestic or international support. If not carefully managed, this aspect of information warfare can be easily lost. Public affairs officers (PAOs) must be prepared for the repercussions of such engagements. In explaining the events leading to the deaths of children, PAOs should stress the context under which the events occurred

When U.S. forces face child soldiers, the best practice appears to be to hold the threat at a distance and initially fire for shock to attempt to break up the child units, which often are not cohesive fighting forces. In a sense, this is the micro-level application of effects-based warfare, but without the overwhelming dependence on high technology.

and the overall mission's importance. PAOs should inform the public that everything possible is being done to avoid and keep child soldiers from becoming casualties. At the same time, the public should be aware that child soldiers armed with AK-47s are just as lethal as are adults. Most important, PAOs must be proactive and seek to turn blame to where it should properly fall, on a regime that illegally and dishonorably pulls children into the military sphere to do its dirty work.

At a broader level, the U.S. Government and its coalition allies must sensitize the public and the wider international community to the issue, stressing how Hussein's regime intentionally created this system knowing that it would lead to the deaths of children. This provides a renewed starting point to work against the general practice in international fora so U.S. forces someday will not have to worry about facing child soldiers.

NOTES

1. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as quoted in remarks to the Children and Armed Conflict Unit, a joint project of the Children's Legal Centre and the Human Rights Centre of the University of Essex in 1999. See The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, on-line at <www.essex.ac.uk/armedconf/themes/child_soldiers/default.htm>. Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.
2. P.W. Singer, "Caution! Children At War," *Parameters* (Winter 2001): 40-56.
3. International law defines child soldiers as any child under the age of 18 recruited into an armed organization and/or engaged in political violence.
4. Matthew Cox, "War Even Uglier When a Child is the Enemy," *USA Today*, 8 April 2003; "Report: Marines Wounded in Fighting Late Wednesday in Iraq," *Associated Press*, 27 March 2003.
5. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers 1379 Report* (2002): 50-51.
6. Radda Barnen, Swedish Save the Children, *Childwar Database*, Principal Investigator: Henric Häggström, on-line at <www.rb.se:8082/www/childwar.nsf/HTML/Forsta?openDocument>.
7. Coalition to Stop, 2002; U.S. Department of State, "Iraq-State Department Report on 2000" (2001); "Saddam 'Cubs' Start Military Training," *Agence France Presse*, 22 June 2002.
8. *Ibid.*
9. "Saddam's Martyrs," on-line at <GlobalSecurity.org>, 12 September 2002; Sean

- Boyne, "Inside Saddam's Security Network," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 9 (July 1997).
10. Coalition to Stop, 2002.
11. Guido Knopp, *Hitler's Kinder* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 2000); Philip Baker, *Youth Led by Youth* (London: Vilmor Publications, 1989).
12. See Stephen Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, c1997), chap. 19.
13. Author interviews, 2002.
14. Martin Indyk and Kenneth Pollack, "Lesson from a Future War with Iraq," *Brookings Institution Iraq Memo* 4 (2 November 2002). The memo reported on a wargame simulation of a potential invasion of Iraq. The wargame was held among former senior U.S. political and military leaders. One of the prevailing lessons learned was the interaction between political exigency and military judgment in determining the optimal pace of offensive operations.
15. MAJ Alan Marshall, in his de-briefing, quoted in Al Venter, "Sierra Leone: A Disreputable Debauch," *Soldier of Fortune* (January 2001). See also Marie Colvin and James Clark, "How the Hi-Tech Army Fell Back on Law of the Jungle and Won," *The Sunday Times*, 17 September 2000.
16. Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, "Child Soldiers: The Implications for U.S. Forces," *U.S. Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory Seminar Report* (November 2002).

Peter Warren Singer is an Olin Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies and Coordinator of the Brookings Project on U.S. Policy toward the Islamic World. He has two upcoming books: Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, June 2003), which looks at the rise of the privatized military industry; and Caution: Children at War (Brookings, Winter 2003), which looks at the child-soldier phenomenon. Singer has worked with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Balkans Task Force and advised the U.S. Marine Corps Warfighting Lab on the child-soldiers issue.